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DEPARTMENT FOR AF/W, OES

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SUBJECT: SIERRA LEONE DEBATES A STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENTAL
ACTION PLAN, USG HELPS

Summary

¶1. The newly formed National Commission on Environment and Forestry (NaCEF) is reaching out to other stakeholders in the development of its Strategic Action Plan. The Regional Environmental Hub Officer made a presentation at a one-day conference about the lessons Sierra Leone could learn from the Congo Basin Forest Partnership model, which increased donor attention and funding to the area. A World Bank presentation focused on accessing funds through the Bank's Global Environment Fund (GEF) for biodiversity conservation. The USG has shown unique interest in Sierra Leone's need for environmental protection and demonstrates that we can be good environmental stewards. NaCEF will need much outside assistance if they are to help combat Sierra Leone's environmental problems, especially the rapid deforestation in the Western Area's watershed. End Summary.

New Commissioner Reaches Out
To Map The Future

¶2. In late May 2006, NaCEF Executive Commissioner Chris Squire invited EconOff and Regional Environmental Hub Officer (REO) to comment on a draft Strategic Action Plan for the country's diminishing forest and wildlife resources. NaCEF is a new institution created by President Kabbah in 2005 to coordinate the work of overlapping ministries, such as Agriculture (which includes the Forestry Division and Wildlife Conservation Branch), Lands (which includes the Environment Division), the Judiciary, and law enforcement bodies in Sierra Leone.

¶3. In a day-long conference, Squire gathered local and international NGOs, researchers, the World Bank and REO to review with ministry officials a draft Strategic Action Plan defining priority actions in three subject areas: coordination within Sierra Leone's institutions; protected areas and biodiversity management; and overall land use and environmental management. Activities were proposed for the short, medium and long term and included plans for internal reform, building partnerships and increasing donors participation in conserving Sierra Leone's fragmented habitats and wildlife.

REO CALLS FOR PARTNERING, COOPERATION

14. REO urged GOSL officials to consider partnering with neighboring states to increase cooperation and develop a regional strategy for conserving forest resources. Examples were given from Central Africa to demonstrate how concerted action can attract other donors and the multiple benefits of cross-border initiatives. The most pertinent example was that of the Congo Basin Forest Partnership, a regional body that has successfully attracted the donor community's attention and commitment. NaCEF officials discussed their difficulties in achieving communication and cooperation among ministries. Many forestry officials felt that it would be difficult to implement strategies without a clear legal mandate for the Commission, which mandate has unfortunately not yet been established by parliament or the executive branch.

Accessing World Bank Environment Funding

15. A World Bank presentation focused on what Sierra Leone needs to do next to access the World Bank's Global Environment Fund (GEF) for its biodiversity conservation project proposal. The project envisions the protection of eight biodiversity areas throughout the country. One of the GEF requirements is for the proposal to identify a sustainable long-term funding mechanism: many favor a trust fund. The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) and Bird Life International are working to establish a trust fund for one of the biodiversity hotspots - the Gola Forest - and hope to establish the mechanism nationwide.

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16. World Bank representative Edward Dwumfor emphasized a systematic approach to evaluating funding mechanisms, however, cautioning that Sierra Leone has no history with public/private partnerships but a long history of political instability, no domestic framework to establish such a fund, and many open questions as to whether there is sufficient management capacity and links to the banking sector in order to make such a trust fund fly. In the end, participants drafted a scope of work for a consultant who would evaluate the various options for a long-term funding mechanism.

USG Interest in Protecting Sierra Leone's Environment
Protects Our Own Environmental Reputation

17. Protecting Sierra Leone's environment has received attention not only by post and the REO but also by two USG technical agencies over the past year. In June of 2005, a delegation of the USDA/Forest Service provided recommendations for better management of the Western Area Forest Preserve, a critical watershed area and biodiversity reserve near the capital. In addition, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service provided a grant for a research team to carry out elephant census work in Outamba-Kilimi National Park, on Sierra Leone's northern border with Guinea. Also, USAID provides funds to conservation projects, including with RSPB and Bird Life International on the Gola Forest Conservation Concession Program, which works with local communities to stop illegal hunting activities and manage resources sustainably.

18. This interest makes the USG the only country working with Sierra Leone bilaterally on environmental issues, providing Post with a unique opportunity to help shape NaCEF's agenda and build U.S. environmental credibility. (Note: The New Embassy Compound is being constructed inside the boundaries of the increasingly deforested

Western Area Forest Preserve. The Ministry of Lands, Country Planning, and Environment offered the NEC building site to Post, but they never ran it by the Forestry Division, which sits in the Ministry of Agriculture. This is one of the inter-ministerial hurdles to communication that NaCEF is meant to eliminate. End Note.)

¶9. One of the hot topics of discussion with environmentalists in Sierra Leone is the construction of the New Embassy Site and the rash of uncontrolled building in the northern part of the WAFP that has resulted. We are working closely with a local NGO consortium, the Environmental Forum for Action, to participate in a national tree planting day to commemorate World Environment Day on June 5.

Comment

¶10. Sierra Leone has a dynamic environmental leader in the person of Chris Squire, but he has a huge task ahead of him and needs all the help he can get. The strategic plan is a good first step and should be followed by the explicit backing of the legislative and executive branch. Post has made an effort to engage with Squire and has sought opportunities to portray the U.S. Government as a responsible environmental steward. At the moment, the U.S. Forest Service is eager to provide their assistance, but no funding has materialized yet. While there are no ready solutions, Post and REO are convinced that the severity and immediacy of current deforestation trends merit further USG support. Deforestation has reduced key watershed areas, leading to flooding, siltation, landslides and gully erosion. Left unchecked, deforestation and watershed degradation will be costly to Sierra Leone's fragile economy. END COMMENT.
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